



United States
Department of
Agriculture

Forest Service



Mark Twain
National Forest,
Region 9



December 2003

SCOPING REPORT

The Weeks Allotment Range and Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project

Mark Twain National Forest
Ava/Cassville/Willow Springs Ranger Districts
Management Area 3.4
Township 24 North, Range 15 West, Sections 3 and 4, Ozark County, Missouri

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I. INTRODUCTION

This scoping report summarizes a proposal to develop the Weeks Range and Wildlife Improvement Project. The purpose of this report is to inform interested and affected parties of the proposal and to solicit comments on the proposal.

A scoping letter was sent in 1994 and in 1997 to solicit comments on this proposal, but the project was dropped due to other priorities in work schedules and changes in funding priorities. The Interdisciplinary team has begun evaluating new information, as well as taking into consideration public comments made during the previous scoping process.

II. LOCATION, SETTING AND BACKGROUND

The project area is approximately 647 acres of National Forest land located in T. 24 N., R. 15 W., Sections 3 and 4, Ozark County, Missouri, approximately ten miles SE of Ava, Missouri. The entire area lies within Compartment 30. The Land and Resource Management Plan (Forest Plan) for the Mark Twain National Forest (MTNF) defines the project area as a 3.4-2 management area, which emphasizes wildlife habitat diversity to maintain and enhance populations of native and naturalized vertebrates. This project area is surrounded completely by private land. The allotment lies within the Bull Shoals Lake Watershed (subbasin 11010003060) and drains to the east into East Prong Creek and to the west into Middle Prong Creek. Both creeks drain into the Little North Fork of the White River (see vicinity map).

The terrain varies from moderate slopes, to low-lands and open ridge fields which are predominantly low and broad. Abandoned old fields characterize the pastures. Side slopes average 5% to 15%.

Vegetation in the project area consist of 86 acres of Shortleaf pine, 138 acres of Oak-Pine, 181 acres of Post Oak, 147 acres of Black oak, 12 acres of eastern red cedar and 80 acres of open to semi-open fields. The cool season pastures are currently being grazed. The dominant grass species on these pastures is tall fescue. Other species include purple top, broomsedge, crab grass and orchard grass. Pasture conditions are stable due to periodic applications of fertilizers. Patches of black jack and post oak brush are currently being mowed to retain open conditions.

There are two riparian areas, each are 1/4 mile long and are located on opposite ends of the compartment. Currently they are fenced from grazing and are in excellent condition. There are no permanent streams or riparian vegetation within the current allotment boundary.

This area was purchased under the Weeks Act in two separate purchases in 1935 and 1939. Approximately 240 acres were in fields and 400 acres were in cut over timber that was grazed. In 1944 and 1966 pine was planted in plantations in much of the old fields. Today, approximately 68 acres remain open, of which 54 are currently grazed under a cool season pasture system. Fourteen (14) acres are glade and not within the grazing allotment.

The grazing allotment was created in 1950 and continued to operate as a summer allotment until 1964. The stocking rate was for 25 cow/calf pairs from May 1 to October 31 during these years. The demand for the allotment decreased in 1964 and the allotment was closed. It remained closed until 1976 when it was permitted again for summer grazing. From 1983 until 1986 it was grazed in the winter (November 16 to February 28) with 20 cow/calf pairs. From 1987 to 1989 the allotment was again used as a summer pasture (June 1 to November 30) with 20 cow/calf pairs. At this time

demand decreased and the allotment was closed. In 1990 the allotment was permitted using a split grazing season allowing 25 cow/calf pairs from May 1 through July 15, and September 1 through October 15, producing 100 Animal Unit Months (AUM'S – The amount of forage necessary for sustenance of one mature cow and a calf, or their equivalent for one month) per annual use.

III. PURPOSE AND NEED AND THE PROPOSED ACTION

The Ava/Cassville/Willow Springs Ranger District is proposing this proposed action for the purposes of improving range and pasture condition and enhance wildlife habitats on the Week grazing allotment. The proposed action is needed due to declining resource condition and to meet the desired future conditions as identified in the Forest Plan.

The Role of the Forest Plan

The Forest Plan, approved in 1986, provides a programmatic framework regarding allocation of land and the measures necessary to protect National Forest resources. It describes how different areas of the MTNF should be managed and what resources should be provided by these lands now and in the future. The Forest Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) displays the forest-wide effects of activities such as timber harvest, wildlife habitat management, recreation management and visual resource management. The site-specific effects of those practices to this project are not part of the Forest Plan (FEIS). An environmental assessment will be prepared to analyze site-specified management activities to this project.

The Forest Plan gives management prescriptions designed to accomplish a Desired Future Condition (DFC). The Forest Plan identifies the area in which this project is to occur as Management Area 3.4-2. The emphasis of Management Area 3.4-2 is to manage for wildlife habitat diversity to maintain and enhance populations of native and naturalized vertebrates (page IV-115 to IV-123).

The Forest Plan also provides guidelines for conserving biological diversity on National Forest lands. Vertical diversity of plant and animal communities are maintained by managing for natural communities in varying stages of development. These stages, or habitat conditions, help provide diverse habitats and ecosystems necessary to sustain healthy populations of plants and animals for the Weeks Allotment.

Goals Directed by the Forest Plan

1. Emphasize wildlife habitat diversity by maintaining and enhancing populations of native and naturalized vertebrates and the habitat for management indicator species (MIS).
2. Provide for moderate to high production of other resources such as timber production, recreation and forage.
3. Manage wildlife habitat intensively where standards and guidelines permit cost effective habitat improvement.
4. Move habitat conditions toward steady-state objectives (or desired future conditions) as individual management area opportunities permit.

Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines to be applied

1. Range management practices shall be appropriately constrained to avoid adverse effects on wild animal populations, jeopardy to viable populations of any existing native or naturalized vertebrate species or the habitat of management indicator species.
2. Invest in moderate to high levels of forage management on grasslands when it does not conflict with wildlife objectives.
3. Permit grazing or haying where it helps achieve, or does not conflict with wildlife objectives.
4. Provide habitat for native and naturalized fish and wildlife species common to the area. Enhance habitat for management indicator species groups. Emphasize habitat for those species most sought by the public.
5. Horizontal and vertical plant and animal diversity will be the result of achieving habitat objectives by wildlife habitat associations within State Natural Division categories.
6. Permanent water sources will be developed as necessary to meet optimum habitat for management indicator species. Existing water holes will be maintained.

Project Objectives and Desired Future Conditions

Concerning the general goal to manage for wildlife MIS and their habitats, the obvious short coming that would need to be met would be to develop a herbaceous understory under much of the current mature sawtimber.

The next obvious shortcoming to overcome that would benefit diversity and wildlife would be to manage most of the pole stands within the compartment for large tree development. Developing large trees would give us many options for the future. This basic habitat gives us the foundation for many habitats and a pool to draw from to create 0-9 age class, if needed. Even though early successional habitat does not exist in the compartment, there is not sufficient sawtimber in the area to create it and maintain the base acreage of mature timber in the compartment. Consequently, large tree development would be a desirable goal.

Maintain and improve the quality in the current open lands. This would include the maintenance of open lands from woody invasion. Maintenance of stubble height and ground cover would provide nesting and winter habitat. Seeding and restricting utilization would also increase the forb component within the cool season open lands.

Within the guidance of the Forest Plan giving the area wildlife emphasis, and being careful not to jeopardize MIS habitats, it would be desirable to manage for moderate output of forage. Investments for control of the stock are already in place. There is an opportunity to directly apply revenue from grazing or vegetative management programs to wildlife improvement work, such as brush hogging, fire line cleaning, seeding, thinning and noxious weed control.

The Forest Plan provides guidelines for conserving biological diversity within National Forest Lands. The vertical diversity of plant and animal communities are maintained by managing for natural communities in varying stages of development. These stages, or habitat conditions, help us provide diverse habitats and ecosystems necessary to sustain healthy populations of plants and animals.

The area is lacking in the 0-9 age class; however recruitment of this habitat would be difficult due to the lack of mature timber in the compartment. The 80% crown closure habitat is pole stands resulting from plantations, which occurred in 1966. These poles are mostly pine or mixed/pine hardwood stands. Old growth exceeds the desired future condition, but not viewed as a disadvantage. Woodlands with 20-30% herbaceous understory is conspicuously lacking and would be considered the most limiting to general wildlife populations in the area. The lack of herbaceous understory is due to the lack of sunlight and litter disturbance in the mature forest. All mature timber stands have dense understories, which is common in this area with the suppression of fire. Open lands habitat is in the low range of what is considered ideal for this LTA. Recruitment is possible with prescribed fire, which may help develop the natural savannas which have presently grown. Water holes in the area are good.

The following proposed actions are designed to enhance these habitats, and move the existing condition toward the DFC while meeting the Forest Plan Goals, Objectives and Standards and Guidelines.

Proposed Actions

The following actions will move the area towards the desired future condition of the management area and will also obtain the objectives in a reasonable and prudent manner (see Table 1 for stand listing and proposed activities):

1. Using a thinning prescription, harvest 186 acres of pine and pine/hardwood stands to encourage large tree development and improve biodiversity and herbaceous production in the understory.
2. Using uneven-age management prescriptions, harvest 109 acres to improve forest health by reducing competition from undesirable trees and improve the diversity and abundance of herbaceous species in the understory.
3. Using a shelterwood prescription harvest 60 acres on two older stands that require regeneration. Basal area (BA) will be reduced down to 30-50 BA with a variety of healthy oaks and hickory retained for seed source. Cavity tree over 26" in diameter will be retained for wildlife and roost trees.
4. Prescribe burn 445 acres on a three to five year rotation, which will:

Develop 53 acres of natural savanna and glade. Develop 51 acres of sawtimber with 20-30% herbaceous understory. Help maintain thinning effect and large tree development on 186 acres with the maintenance of herbaceous understory. Control lines will consist of approximately 0.60 mile of old road, and 3.3 miles of new line construction.

5. Control approximately 17 infested acres of noxious weeds (multiflora rose and sericea lespedeza) on 42 gross acres by spot treating with herbicides.
6. Reconstruct approximately 1.0 miles of Forest Road 608
7. Analyze and develop an Allotment Management Plan (AMP) for the Weeks Allotment that will outline livestock management practices. The analysis will focus on reviewing the capacity of the allotment for livestock grazing, season of use and management practices such as fertilizing, salting, mowing and occasional haying. If an action alternative is selected, a new Term Grazing

Permit authorizing grazing on the allotment will be issued, and included in part three of the permit, applicable Forest Plan standards and guidelines and a new AMP.

Table 1 - Summary of Proposed Action and Objectives

Compartment	Stand(s)	Acers	Proposed Action	Objectives
30	11	17	UAM-Group selection with improvement cut	Thin lower quality trees and existing clumps to reduce competition.
30	14, 16	33	Thin	Thin to maximize growing space
30	21, 23, 24, 26	78	Thin	Thin pine and reduce existing clumps to maximize growth of residual trees while fully utilizing the site.
30	108, 123	60	Shelterwood	Develop regeneration in these older stands while leaving some reserve trees for seed sources and wildlife den trees
30	113	11	UAM-Individual tree selection	Salvage declining trees and reduce competition to allow healthier trees more room to grow
30	114, 117, 118, 122, 126	81	UAM-Group selection with improvement cut	Restore these low site index stands into open woodland with a diverse herbaceous understory of grasses, sedges and forbs
30	124, 128, 20	70	Thin	Thin to maintain an open understory with a 20 to 30% herbaceous component
30	18 – 28, 106 – 109, 112 – 118, 122 – 126, 128 and portions of 13, 16	445	Prescribed Fire	Prescribed burn every 3 to 5 years to improve the diversity of herbaceous understory and reduce competition from less desirable woody species. In pine stands improve site for pine regeneration

IV. DECISION TO BE MADE

The District Ranger of the Ava/Cassville/Willow Springs Ranger District is the official responsible for selecting an alternative for the management of the Weeks Allotment. Based on the existing conditions and Forest Plan directions, the Deciding Official must decide whether or not to proceed with a specific action. If an action alternative is selected, the decision may include mitigation measures in addition to the Forest Plan Standards and Guidelines.

The decision is not one of land allocation, nor is the analysis intended to look at every possible combination of activities. The scope of the decision will be confined to a reasonable range of alternatives that will meet the project purpose and need.

V. PRELIMINARY ISSUES

In accordance with laws and regulations, factors such as vegetation, wildlife, threatened and endangered species, water and air quality and cultural resources will be addressed in the analysis. The proposed action will likely develop unresolved conflicts or concerns that reflect opposing views concerning these and other factors. These concerns, or issues, will be used to develop a reasonable range of alternatives so the deciding official can make an informed decision. Other concerns or issues may develop as a result of public comment. Several preliminary issues have been identified by the interdisciplinary team that need to be considered during our analysis of this project. This includes, but is not limited to the following:

- Ecosystem health and vigor
- Pasture management
- Lack of herbaceous understory

PROPOSED WEEKS ALLOTMENT RANGE AND WILDLIFE HABITAT IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

You are invited to comment on this proposal. If you have concerns specific to this project, or if you desire to be kept informed please complete this form and mail it to following address. You may also respond electronically to the following email address: comments-eastern-mark-twain-ava@fs.fed.us (subject line: Weeks). If you have any questions, please contact Brian Davidson at (417) 683-4428.

Please return your comments by January 15, 2004

<i>Name:</i>
<i>Address:</i>
<i>Phone #:</i>

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